

Paul Emile Lemerle

1903–1989

On July 17, 1989, Paul Emile Lemerle, one of the greatest Byzantinists of our day, died in Paris. He was, until the moment of his death, actively engaged in scholarly activity, primarily in the direction and supervision of the massive work he undertook many years ago, the publication of the archives of Mount Athos.

Paul Lemerle was educated in the great French tradition, studying at the lycées Charlemagne and Louis-le-Grand, and then at the Sorbonne and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes. His subsequent career and his publications bear the mark of a profound knowledge of the classical languages, archaeology, and history. His first important post was at the French School of Archaeology in Athens, where he was a member and then general secretary from 1931 until the war forced him to return to France, in 1941. He taught at the University of Dijon and at the Sorbonne, where he became a Professor in 1958. Concurrently he was, after 1947, Director of Studies at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes. In 1967 he became Professor at the Collège de France, a most distinguished post from which he retired in 1973; for the first time, the chair he held was named the chair in the History and Civilization of Byzantium. In his inaugural lecture, he explained why the chair should be so named: he planned to integrate the study of texts, documents, archaeology, art, and coins in order to explore Byzantine history fully. This he did, in both his teaching and his research.

Lemerle's influence on the field of Byzantine studies was profound and manifested itself in a variety of ways. His own publications were path-breaking. One of his first works, *Philippes et la Macédoine orientale à l'époque chrétienne et byzantine* (1945), is a tour-de-force, in which the data provided by archaeology, philology, and history interpret and complement each other. The book started as a report of the discoveries of his excavations on

the site of Philippi. But instead of adding a short historical commentary to the archaeological work, Lemerle published an extensive historical study which covers the centuries from St. Paul to the Ottoman conquest and remains the definitive work on this area. Significantly, the same year saw the publication of a very different piece of scholarship, the *Actes de Kuthumus*, his first volume of documents from Mount Athos (a second edition was published in 1988). In that volume he established the principles of the diplomatic edition of Athonite documents, principles which have been followed ever since. In his preface he alluded to the future Corpus of the Athonite documents as becoming, one day, the most important source for the study of the history and the institutions of Byzantium and the Christian Orient. The book on Philippi, and the publication of the documents of Kutlumus, which were the two parts of his thesis for the Doctorat d'Etat, mark two of the main areas of his distinguished scholarly activity: the publication of documents and works of synthesis. A team of scholars, under his direction and with his active participation, has been carrying out the publication of the Athonite archives, which has provided priceless information for the administrative, economic, and social history of Byzantium, and has permitted scholars to undertake a number of studies based on these sources. I think that his passionate interest in the Athonite documents was partly motivated by his belief that the internal history of the Byzantine Empire is, to a large extent, the history of man's relationship to land; and, indeed, agrarian history has to be written on the basis of this documentation.

Among Paul Lemerle's other publications of sources, one must single out the edition of the miracles of St. Demetrius, followed by an authoritative commentary (*Les plus anciens recueils des miracles de Saint Démétrius et la pénétration des Slaves dans les Bal-*



kans, published in 1979 with the Commentary in 1981).

The works of analysis and synthesis are too numerous and too well-known to discuss in detail. However, one must mention his *Cinq études sur le XI^e siècle byzantin*, published in 1977. It is a seminal work, which profoundly altered our understanding of the eleventh century and put forth a new interpretation of this important period, one that shows the eleventh century as a lost opportunity, for a moment a turning point in the history of Byzantium, as it was in the history of western Europe: with this difference, that in Byzantium the new developments were not allowed to come to fruition. His work on the eleventh century is an example of his approach to subjects which he considered important. The kernel of the new interpretation was contained in his inaugural lecture of 1967; the subject formed the focus of his seminars at the Collège de France for two consecutive years, 1971–73, and also of a Round Table, in September 1973. A number of very important articles came out of this concentrated study, and were published in a volume of *Travaux et Mémoires*. His own research, including an interpretative survey of the period, appeared in the book mentioned above. The elaboration of a new view of this period was the result of his personal seminal contributions and of collective work.

One must also mention his *Esquisse pour une histoire agraire de Byzance*, first published in 1958, and translated into English in 1979, at which time it was extended to cover the period down to 1204. This is still, as far as I know, the only modern synthesis of Byzantine agrarian history. Finally, *Le premier humanisme byzantin: Notes et remarques sur l'enseignement et la culture à Byzance des origines au Xe siècle*, published in 1971, is a masterful study of high learning in Byzantium.

In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, Paul Lemerle presented his view of Byzantine society. For him, Byzantium, which he called the dawn of the third Hellenism, was a society of great complexity and originality, and a vital, lively world. He spoke of the enigma of Byzantium, where an apparent and conscious immobility was meant to hide the constant changes which the society underwent, as all lively cultures must; elsewhere he spoke of this phenomenon as the trap that Byzantium has set for us. He was interested in both aspects of the enigma: the world of illusion, the world of reality, and the equilibrium between the two. He also saw Byzantium as the best vantage point for the historian of the Middle Ages, since

the study of Byzantine society invites the study of societies which extend beyond it: the Slavic world, the Arabs, the West. He cautioned against the reductionism that false analogies with other medieval or modern societies entail; he insisted on the importance of focusing on the specificities of Byzantium; he urged us not to blunt its edges and not to dim its vitality in our studies. It was a majestic and dynamic concept of the subject to which he devoted his life; this concept he carried out in his work, and with this vision he inspired others.

Lemerle's own publications have revitalized the field of Byzantine studies, and produced new interpretations of important phenomena in political, social, intellectual, and cultural history. As the great master he was, he has placed his mark on the field forever. His influence on the field, however, goes beyond his personal scholarly achievement. From his position at the Sorbonne, the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, and the Collège de France, he undertook a vast task of organizing research in the field, and steering his many students and other scholars in productive directions. The testimony of this aspect of his activity may be found in the publications which came out of the various institutions with which he was associated, and of the Centre de recherche d'histoire et civilisation byzantines, which he directed. It may also be found in his large concept of history which encompasses Byzantium, the Slavic world, and the Mediterranean, and places Byzantium at the center of this broad geographic space. It is because of this concept that a number of Lemerle's students have undertaken publications connected with other parts of the medieval world. He spoke once of the "deceptive silences" of Byzantine sources, which leave great gaps in our knowledge of important topics. In part, this gap has been filled by the publication of documents from Venice, Ragusa, the Morea, and the Genoese colonies as well as Ottoman documents, in the series *Documents et recherches sur l'économie des pays byzantins, islamiques et slaves, et leurs relations commerciales au Moyen Age*, which he directed. What the publication of the Athonite archives has done for the agrarian history of Byzantium, the documents in this series, along with the sources published elsewhere by his students, have accomplished for the history of trade in the eastern Mediterranean and the Byzantine Empire. In both cases, our documentary base has been very considerably expanded, and this has already given rise to important studies which have changed our understanding of Byzantium and of the world around it.

Paul Lemerle's contributions to Byzantine studies have been formally recognized in many ways and in many countries. He was membre de l'Institut since 1966; he was a member of the Academies of Athens, Austria, Belgium, Palermo, Yugoslavia, the British Academy, and the Ionian Academy, to list only a few of the many societies of which he was a regular or honorary member. In the United States, he was a member of the Medieval Academy of America and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He served as President of the International Association of Byzantine Studies for ten years, from 1961 to 1971, and then became Honorary President of the Association.

Formal honors, however, are not sufficient to convey the greatness of the man or the impact of the scholar on the field. Paul Lemerle made Paris into the most important center of Byzantine studies. The great majority of eminent French Byzantinists were his students, as were many scholars from all over the world. He created a school, or at least so it is known outside France, whose influence has spread much beyond his own country, through his students and his publications. The school is characterized by great intellectual rigor, by a profound respect for the sources without which there is no history, and at the same time by a meticulous analysis of the sources, so that one can understand what they say and what they do not say, and thus not run the danger of becoming enslaved to their superficial meaning. At its best, the school is also characterized by a deep understanding of Byzantine society and its culture.

Those who were fortunate enough to have come into contact with him will remember not only his

erudition but his humanity, kindness, and generosity. The exact opposite of a hoarder of things intellectual, he had exemplary generosity, sharing his ideas, offering advice, furnishing information and research materials. Young scholars approached him with awe; prolonged contact with him did not, perhaps, diminish the awe, but added to it admiration and devotion. He had the great gift of recognizing the particular talents of individual scholars and nurturing them. Uncompromising in his scholarly strictness, he could inspire in others the professionalism and passion for Byzantine studies which informed his own life.

Dumbarton Oaks is among the many beneficiaries of his erudition and wisdom. Some years ago, he spent a semester here. He gave lectures and with his presence contributed greatly to the intellectual life of the institution. His interest in Dumbarton Oaks and in the scholars working in it remained strong until the end. We are also his beneficiaries in an indirect way, since a number of the scholars who are associated with Dumbarton Oaks either were his students or were connected with him in other ways. Above all, we are in his debt as Byzantinists, for his impact on the field.

I last saw Paul Lemerle a few months before his death. He was unwell, but that was not what dominated one's consciousness of him. His passion for things Byzantine was as great as ever, and as contagious; the clarity of his thought still opened unsuspected doors and illuminated dark areas; his judgment was unerring. As it had done over so many years, his presence impressed and inspired.

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